

ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN

Official Publication of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English

Vol. 33, No. 6

Urbana, Illinois

March, 1946

Published every month except June, July, August, and September. Subscription price, \$1.00 per year; single copies, 15 cents, or two for 25 cents. *Entered as second-class matter October 29, 1941, at the post office at Urbana, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1879.* Communications may be addressed to C. W. Roberts, 204a Lincoln Hall, Urbana, Illinois.

The Social Values of Composition

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"Gee whiz! Another theme!" exclaims the high-school boy disgustedly. Yes, composition writing is a bane in the lives of many young people. It is hard for the English teacher to interest her pupils in writing because they do not feel it is practical. But it is. Writing has social values for every individual that should not be overlooked. If the teacher can make her pupils realize these values, composition writing can become a satisfying experience to them.

The purpose of education is to train young people for life. This should be the objective of every teacher, but it has particular significance for the teacher of English. A mathematics teacher might, conceivably, teach the content of her course and ignore life. An English teacher cannot, for her content is life itself, whether it be the social, moral, and personal problems presented in literature or the early experience, immature thoughts, and half-formed ideas that constitute most composition work. If the object in composition were the production of professional writers, it might well be struck from the course of study. But if the object is the personal growth of the individual, the value of written expression can hardly be overestimated.¹

The superior type of citizen does not just happen. He is the product of education in the home, community, and school. Every curriculum should contain some place in it a course devoted to the enrichment and fertilization of the soil of the mind. The aim of such a course should be that of increasing a student's con-

¹ McAdow, B., "Nourishment of Our Youth," *The English Journal* (Nov. 1945), 472.

scious control over his mind, and of improving his critical awareness of his own thought processes.² One of the courses which should have such an aim is the English composition class. Any teacher of composition who neglects to lead her students to an appreciation of their inheritance and their responsibility toward the society in which they live and to develop techniques of intelligent thinking is little more than an automaton who goes through the motions of teaching the subject matter of her field but fails to capitalize on the richness of her subject.³ In this modern world of speed, where the impact of experience grows more bewildering, the teacher not only needs to set aside for the students some time for honest reflection but to give her maturer pupils definite instruction in the arts of thinking. Writing must become for the individual not only a means of social communication but also an important aid in his own personal development.⁴

One of the best ways to stimulate and organize thinking is through composition writing. Yet to many students this field offers the fewest attractions and possibilities. Therefore, the first step for the composition teacher is to convince the student that a vital connection lies between his own social life and his power to express himself. Often this personal relationship can be established by organizing discussions around the student's own experiences, his first-hand observations of simple happenings close to his interests, and then reporting them vividly and directly.⁵ After this has been accomplished the teacher can begin in earnest to stimulate thinking — thinking that will help the student in handling his own personal problems and those of the society in which he is to become a responsible citizen.

The teacher of today has many devices at her disposal that she may use to stimulate the thinking of her pupils. Well-planned trips, movies, radio programs, books, conferences, and group discussions are a few of the means that the teacher might use. Lois S. Bertling, of Junior High School, Bronx, New York, found that her pupils derived a great deal of benefit from the correlation of composition writing with the reading of current magazine and newspaper articles and editorials. "Exploratory, extensive,

² Cook, L. B., "Writing in Terms of the Individual," *The English Journal* (April 1945), 195.

³ Taylor, Broening, and Harriss, "English in War and in Peace," *Baltimore Bulletin of Education* (April 1942), 190.

⁴ Cook, L. B., *op. cit.*, 196.

⁵ Cooper, A. C., "How the Study of English Enriches Life," *California Journal of Secondary Education* (Oct. 1945), 319.

and intensive all at once, drawing upon the best there is in current publications, this method of teaching composition meets the requirements of progressive education. It is an activity of the intellect, teaching composition form and the appreciation of first-class composition together with a wide-awake interest in current literature and thought."⁶

There are many golden opportunities that the teacher of composition can use to direct the thinking and writing of her students into paths that will be of vital importance to them as members of society. Although many high-school seniors plan to continue their education, there are still a great many who do not. They are interested in finding a vocation in which they can find security and happiness. Here is an opportunity for the composition teacher. Since students do better writing when the subject is of interest to them, why not use vocations as the subject for a piece of composition of an investigative nature? But be sure that each pupil selects a topic which is suited to his individual interests and abilities. From such an assignment the pupil would not only learn how to prepare a bibliography, to take notes, to organize his material, and to use footnotes properly, but he would gain a great deal of information about different types of vocations. He might have his interest so much aroused that he would want to investigate further, even after his theme had been handed in and corrected. Wilma Hastie, of Senior High School, Fort Dodge, Iowa, found this plan very successful for her high-school seniors. The finished papers contained very good writing and during the time students were working on them, class discussions were lively and interesting.⁷

Another subject that is of vital interest to the student, particularly the college student, is a workable philosophy of life. Colleges are responsible for guiding the student at one of the most critical periods of his development, yet too often they offer him little or no assistance in some of the areas that are bothering him most: religion, sex, morals, choice of a vocation, etc. The vast majority of students are given no help in systematically and intelligently crystallizing their own philosophies of life. Philosophy courses are offered which theoretically deal with problems of value, but most of them tend to be merely technical, pedantic summaries of philosophic systems of thought. Little, if any, effort

⁶ Bertling, L. S., "Composition With Form and Freedom," *High Points* (Jan. 1944), 61.

⁷ Hastie, W., "Senior Composition and Vocational Guidance," *The English Journal* (Oct. 1944), 439.

is made to link these with the students' own personal lives. In his college freshman English classes, Mr. J. D. Baker has attempted to provide some guidance in these problems through the freshman English course. At the end of a period of reading and discussion on these problems, each student writes his own philosophy of life. Although some might insist that this work should be given by the philosophy department, Mr. Baker states four reasons for this combination of English and philosophy.

First, there is the significant point that freshman composition is usually the only course which reaches all students. Since the work attempts to stimulate and direct students' thinking about some of the most basic problems of their lives, should it not be given to all students?

Second, the work helps to solve two of the major difficulties of all English departments. One of the difficult tasks of any instructor of composition is to provide true writing situations, in which one writes partly because he has something to say. Anyone who has participated in student "bull" sessions on religion, morals, or marriage knows that most students are deeply concerned over such philosophical questions. They welcome a chance to discuss them frankly.

The third advantage is that the study provides excellent practice in oral expression. Class discussions during this unit are the most enthusiastic and stimulating of the year. All the questions are highly controversial, and they bring out eager defenses of conflicting points of view.

In the final analysis, one of the important tests of any work in a composition course should be the kind of writing the work produces. Mr. Baker has found that the philosophy papers have produced some of the best writing done in freshman composition. He writes: "Not only do they give sincere expressions of personal points of view, but they are written with more individual style and more effective expression than any other papers of the year. And, most significant of all, this brief introduction helps the students to begin as freshmen the process of intellectual and psychological maturing."⁸

One of the objectives of modern education is to teach pupils fundamental democratic principles. Here, too, the composition teacher is able to help. She can make her classroom a place where boys and girls learn democratic living. Cooperative action for the

⁸ Baker, J. D., "The Value of Writing Philosophies of Life in Freshman English Classes," *College English* (Dec. 1943), 141.

common good is an underlying principle behind all effective class-room activities. Group work in both oral and written composition is one of the effective means by which this can be accomplished, for thereby responsible students are given the freedom to plan and direct their own work.

To the specific question of how the composition teacher is to imbue her students with a love for and an understanding of democracy, there can be no exact answer. "It is the teacher, more than any set pattern or subject matter, who is the key to an appreciation of the democratic processes. Concepts of the meaning of democracy depend profoundly on the skill with which thought through language can be communicated. Democracy depends upon intelligent understanding and understanding depends upon the precision and power with which our thoughts, our feelings, and our great emotions can be conveyed."⁹

Another social value of composition is the broadening of mental and spiritual horizons which writing based on personal experience can bring. The expression in literary form of something the writer has seen or done calls for a clarification and organization of experience which leads to a fuller comprehension of the society in which one lives. The impossibility of telling everything about anything compels one to adopt a purpose and a point of view in selecting and arranging his material. Merely choosing a subject requires selection in accordance with some standard of value. Thereafter the act of expression constantly forces the writer not only to select but also to define, to limit, to set forces, characters, and situations in relation to one another. All this comes to no more than the common saying that no one has fully experienced anything until he has expressed it.

When these processes are brought to bear upon the writer's own experience, instead of something more remote, they aid him to find a pattern in his life. Moreover, that life becomes more interesting. The student's vision is sharpened to what is meaningful and colorful in his past and in the world about him. The character sketch of a friend or acquaintance sharpens the student's observation of traits of personality and paves the way for understanding, tolerance, and a mature scheme of character values. The anecdote trains him to see the significant moment — not in glamorous story-book life but in his own existence. Description leads him to an appreciation of the beauty and drama in his surroundings. The familiar essay clears away the debris

⁹ Taylor, Broening, and Harriss, *op. cit.*, 193.

of unreflective habit from the humor, the human interest, the meaning buried in his own days.¹⁰

"To look at life directly; to cast aside the lenses of literary convention and the astigmatism of habit; to comprehend for oneself, as the poet does, the source and significance of one's emotion; to realize, as the novelist does, one's place in one's society — this is no unworthy educational goal. The more nearly the student approaches it, the greater will be his sense of the beauty and the meaning of his life and his world."¹¹

A social value of composition writing that is of great importance but has never been fully realized is the opportunity it affords for personality adjustments and growth. In achieving mental health, writing is as valuable as reading. Expression, spontaneity, and creativity are necessary attributes in a free life; they are also the ingredients from which mental health develops. One of the responsibilities of the teacher is to understand boys and girls well enough to help them find experiences which will be satisfying and individually beneficial. These experiences and their recording should contribute to the establishment of socially desirable attitudes and values.

One of the best ways for the teacher to get to know her pupils is by having them write chapters in their own autobiographies. This autobiographical writing is the material of case history. As the psychologist makes use of a case history so may the English teacher use this writing as a tool to help the student understand the influences that have shaped his life and personality.

Psychiatrists have proved that the unuttered experience has a far more illogical effect upon the personality than the experience put into words; therefore the composition teacher can lend a powerful hand in clearing away these unreasoning and unreasonable influences. "What human being does not bear within himself a hundred unrealized irrationalities: opinions rooted in isolated chance happenings and prejudices stemming from single instances? Subconsciously we are unwilling to face the genesis of these attitudes, and often as soon as expression brings them into the light of day they crumble to dust."¹² We are ashamed of our race prejudice, for example, when we have once, by recounting the trivial episode from which it sprang, plainly seen the relationship between cause and effect. Since writing is the most

¹⁰ Buckingham, L. H., "Creative Writing Based Upon Experience; Some Psychological Values," *The English Journal* (Sept. 1941), 553.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 557.

¹² *Ibid.*, 553.

ordered and reflective form of direct expression, the teacher of composition, dealing with a flood of material taken from the lives of her students, is able, if she will, to help them to realize why they are what they are and do what they do.

Natalie Robinson Cole of Los Angeles Public Schools has done a great deal of work in the therapeutic values of composition. Some of her ideas have been too startling for many educators but the results she has obtained are not to be overlooked. In one of her fifth-grade classes she was confronted with a group of problem boys. When she had the class write on the terrible things they had done, it became evident to the whole class that these boys were not nearly as bad as they thought they were. In dealing with a Mexican group of sixth-graders, she discovered, by a chance remark, that many of them were extremely prejudiced against their fathers. She chose the subject "Some Fathers Are Jerks" for their writing assignment. From the results she was able to clear up quite a few of their home problems.¹³

The following is an example of writing that Miss Cole received in one of her classes:

Teachers try to put something in your mind instead of letting it out. They let them boil up just like a teakettle and don't take off the lid. You take the lid off your teakettle and let the steam out. Then let the children have that same chance.

Now I will tell you where I got my idea. Well about two weeks ago our minister and some others went to and Old Folks Home and he gave a talk about when people go crazy is that they had no one to tell their troubles to and some of those insane people get all right when they get all that out of their system — So that's that.

Lucille, age 10.

Miss Cole writes: "Every once in awhile I let the children take the lid off their kettle. We write about things that have embarrassed us or have made us feel that we're not as good as other people. Such subjects as 'Things We've Remembered to Forget' and 'Home Life' have brought many interesting results."¹⁴

Through this type of writing Miss Cole is able to understand her pupil and his needs. If he is becoming maladjusted along a certain line, revealed in his writing, she may help him to be a healthy, normal youngster no longer inhibited by something he

¹³ Cole, N. R., "Creative Writing as Therapy," *Elementary English Review* (Jan. 1943), 2.

¹⁴ Cole, N. R., "Creative Writing for Therapy," *Elementary English Review* (April 1945), 124.

has been afraid to express. He has found an opportunity to take the lid off his teakettle and let the steam out.

Composition writing *should* be one of the ways that adolescents may let off steam. It is important to them to have the opportunity to do so and it is important to the teacher to give them this opportunity if she is to gain an understanding of her pupils and their needs. This therapeutic value of composition should not be minimized. It is an important step in doing away with the maladjustments of personality.

Composition writing, therefore, is of significance in training young people for life. To stimulate and organize thinking, to gain an understanding of and appreciation for democratic principles, to broaden one's mental and spiritual horizons, to aid in personality adjustment—these are the contributions composition writing can make to each student, contributions which are important to him as a member of society.

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Approaches to Creative Writing

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Creative writing has been defined in various ways, but perhaps the simplest statement is the one that says it is "free writing or self-expression in English."¹ It is free in that the student chooses his own material, his own method of expression, and his own language to convey his ideas, and it is a form of self-expression in that it represents the writer's reaction to his own experience either in reality or in imagination. "Only when a person recognizes the value of his own experience and translates this experi-

¹ Roanf, R. Avice, "Creative Writing," *Virginia Journal of Education*, (November, 1942), 124.

ence through words do we have creative expression."² Creative writing does not just happen. This type of creative artistry is not obtained by simply permitting pupils to be natural. It is "a long, slow, discouraging process, and all sorts of devices are used to make it grow into a real, living thing."³ Each teacher develops her own approach, uses her own particular devices to help her students achieve successful writing ability, but for the purpose of simple explanation I shall try to group the many and various trends into four general categories: the psychological approach, the observation method, one related to reading, and the fourth employing discussion and group work. It must be understood that none of these divisions can be considered clearly defined or definite because overlapping and interlocking occur in all of them. For instance, the psychological approach invades all of the forms to a certain extent. Observation occurs in different degrees in all of the forms whether the thing to be observed is a material object to be described or a thought to be expressed, and reading and group discussions are the probable original stimuli for most pieces of creative writing.

I

Modern education is now putting emphasis upon the development of character, the integration of a personality, rather than on memorization of mere fundamentals or facts. Creative writing is one of the best courses through which to effect these values. First, we must remember that creative writing does allow a person to express his own ideas and personal feelings. Subject matter imposed by the teacher has never proved satisfactory. It generally brings forth only stilted or surface writing, and it certainly does not meet the psychological needs of children. No teacher can tell a pupil what his ideas will be or know what subject will be meaningful to him. Only the pupil himself can know the thoughts he wishes to express. Free choice of subject matter and the expression of his own ideas through writing help a student find emotional release.

The attitude of the teacher in creating an environment conducive to sincere and valuable expression on the part of the pupil will be discussed later, but it can be mentioned now that the teacher must prove an understanding person in order to make the pupil

² *Ibid.*, 124.

³ Meek, Shirley, "Creative Writing," *National Elementary Principal*, (July, 1941), 346.

feel free to write about anything. Once this feeling of ease and freedom in the student-teacher relationship is established, the teacher can gradually propose the problematic approach. This could quite well be defined as the self-written, case history type through which the pupil gains insight into his own problems. It is difficult for a student to dig down into his thoughts and to express them in written form. One boy said he often thought about the people who go to church to make business contacts rather than for sincere religious purposes, but he did not consider that subject matter for a theme. He thought themes expressed surface material about hobbies, a camping trip, etc. In other words, in actual practice the student divorces himself from the writing. The teacher must first establish her own sincere, understanding attitude and then create an environment which will encourage what one teacher calls "honesty in writing."⁴

Gradually, as the pupil expresses more and more his innermost thoughts and describes his own actual experiences, he will come to recognize some of the things which influence his life. He will learn more about himself, see himself objectively, and understand why he does a certain thing. In short, the student will gain insight into his own behavior.

The next value in this method is that of growth of the personality. Once a person has insight into his own character, he will not only recognize but want to improve the faulty aspects of his personality. Some methods of improvement the student will see for himself. Others will be worked out with the aid of the teacher or, if the school is large enough to include such a member on the staff, with the help of the psychology adviser. The student must learn to write what he feels within him, but by keen self-analysis and clear thinking he can be aided in building a better basis for his thoughts and in developing finer responses.

These then are the psychological values of the case history type of creative writing. But what are the actual devices employed in this problematic approach? One method is letter-writing. The student who has recognized his problem and can trust the teacher to help him can record his problem in a letter to the teacher. Suppose the child has a handicap. The teacher will ask the child to state exactly what the handicap is, whether physical, emotional, economic, social, or a combination of several. Next the student will discuss his attitude toward the handicap and

⁴ Henry, George H., "How to Get Interesting Themes," *English Journal*, (September, 1944), 350.

what part it plays in his achievement of an integrated personality. Such economic handicaps as having to leave school to work, having no money for college, or being ashamed of a poor home may appear. Emotional handicaps may arise from ridicule by others or from lack of attention because of parents' preference for other children in the family. A person with bad eyesight or one who is extremely short may experience inferiority feelings. Other problems arising may be those of girls who cannot get dates, those of children whose parents set too high standards for them, or those of students who do not like to recite in class. The diary form of writing is very similar to the letter-writing device. In general it states what is contained in the body of the letter, but one may have more appeal than the other for certain people.

Not only do the letter-writing and diary forms give the pupil an opportunity for self-analysis and for changing attitudes, but they serve as emotional outlets for feelings of rebellion or unrest. As to the writing technique, the pupil will learn to choose his words precisely and to rewrite a paper many times before handing it in because he will want to express his own ideas so clearly and correctly that anyone who reads it may understand exactly what he means. By becoming aware of his own experiences he will sharpen his character descriptions when he writes about others. He will not only tell what another person looks like but also what he does and says, what the attitudes of others toward the person are, and what type of environment the person lives in and how it affects his life.

Another type of writing with obvious values toward building a well rounded personality is that which brings in etiquette and cultural or social standards. One group of high school students started a column in their school newspaper on desirable social habits pertinent to their needs. They made their own rules about good taste in cafes, at various types of parties, etc., and they worked out their own rating scale after studying models.

In all three of these devices the teacher states nothing logistically but acts as a guide and helper. The personality of the teacher is all important in teaching any subject, but perhaps it is even more important in this psychological approach to writing. As has been mentioned before, the students must be able to have complete faith and trust in the teacher. To them she must be friend, confidant, and adviser, a person to whom they can tell their problems and their innermost thoughts with the secure knowledge that these personal feelings will never be divulged. The teacher must make them feel her friendship not only to

having pleasant conversations with them at school but by associating with them in some of their social functions. Because of these shared experiences, the students will feel that the teacher does understand "their side of things" and that she is interested in them. The teacher must never fail to encourage a pupil and keep him working. She must pick out the few good points in a generally poor paper and praise them to keep a poor student trying. (It is often wise to give such praise before the class.) She must be willing at all times to have conferences with individual students. Although the students need not recognize it, the teacher must be guiding and directing them all the time even though she is not presenting them with ideas but helping them become skillful with the tool through which they can express their own ideas. The teacher must provide stimulating experiences in the classroom for writing, not because the student does not have them elsewhere but because pupils are not always alert to them outside of class and may not consider their responses of value. "Children will *want* to write if the environment and atmosphere are conducive to creative writing."⁵ Five specific objectives for teachers as stated by the National Council of Teachers of English are:

- (1) to help pupils recognize the value of their own experiences
- (2) to amplify the range of pupils' experiences
- (3) to improve the quality of pupils' experiences by encouraging more discriminating observation
- (4) to aid pupils to fit words to details of experience
- (5) to help pupils discover suitable forms for the transfer of their experiences to others.

The teacher's attitude then is highly important in trying to give the student psychological help.

As one author expressed it, without this psychological aim "composition is just another skill, but not education."⁶ With such an approach "writing becomes for the individual not only a means of social communication, but an important aid in his own personal development."⁷

II

Under the observation method, pupils may describe actual objects placed before the class, may record events of a visit made

⁵ Bowers, Mary E., "Guiding Experiences in Free Writing," *Elementary English Review*, (May, 1945), 179.

⁶ Henry, *op. cit.*, 355.

⁷ Cook, Luella B., "Writing in Terms of the Individual," *English Journal*, (April, 1945), 199.

by the class, or may write down their thoughts after a period of reflection. Observation then is not only an awareness of tangible objects but also a heightening or sharpening of attention to thoughts. Observation of objects develops the quality of precise description. Also by learning to describe an object correctly, a pupil will later be able to distinguish between opinion and fact in less tangible subjects.

One teacher had his pupils spend twenty minutes each day alone when they were to think about some problem, some statement, anything pertinent to their lives.⁸ After this reflection period, the students had to write in a five-sentence paragraph a precise statement of their ideas which resolved from this period of thinking. This method made it impossible to tell everything, and as a result the student was compelled to adopt a purpose or point of view as well as having to have good arrangement of material. The content of these paragraphs surpassed that of many longer papers written by the same students, and the paragraphs conveyed an exact meaning with no padded or hazy statements. Another teacher gave the students the topic: "Interpreting the 'Colors of Life.'"⁹ Each student was to write what associations the word pink or blue or purple held for him. In the whole system of observation, imagination and reality join forces.

III

Through reading of classics and other works, the students are given an example of various styles of writing. A pupil should be encouraged to look for color and beauty of expression in reading. Students will receive inspiration from reading books because they will find experiences in their own backgrounds similar to those of the author. Also some topic in a book may provide inspiration for argument from the student. Those who advocate this approach say that "the more effectively a student reads, the more effectively he writes."¹⁰

IV

The fourth method is that of discussion and group work. Two chief purposes of class discussions are to help the student

⁸ Donchian, Peter, Professor of Communications at Stephens College, Columbia, Missouri.

⁹ Meek, *op. cit.*, 350.

¹⁰ Mathews, E. G., and others, "Experimental Investigation of the Relation Between Reading Training and Achievement in College Composition Classes," *Journal of Educational Research*, (March, 1945), 500.

learn to organize his thoughts and state them precisely and to serve as stimulative periods which may suggest some topic for the student to write about. Through class discussions, English composition can be related to other subjects. Class discussions about books can be very effective. There can be correlation between classic-reading and suggested, modern-day theme topics in this method. Or another device in connection with reading might be the follow-up class discussion on this question made by the teacher: "In your three stages of reading — that is, in grade school, junior high school, and now in senior high school — has your choice of reading material changed?"

The English teacher might take her pupils for a visit to an art studio. A later class discussion might involve such topics as what one incident or which art object most impressed each individual, or a comparison of notes about painters, sculptors, etc. Current events might be the topic of discussion in cooperation with the history department. Perhaps many occupations could be discussed in class. Then each student might have a conference with the school's vocational guidance director and take tests to discover in which field he excels. Then each pupil might write a term paper on one occupation.

One teacher always had her students tell an incident before the class before writing it and also had them tell how it made them feel.¹¹ Then the entire class discussed why it affected the individual in that way. This method is of definite psychological value if the teacher is careful in her direction and if she is capable of giving the students correct psychological knowledge on which to base their discussion.

Another device is that of having student criticism of themes. The teacher might select certain good themes, perhaps each one especially illustrative of one point which the teacher would like to emphasize, and then ask the students to comment. She might also select a theme in which an error common to many in the class was made. Naturally the names of the authors of the manuscripts read should be left unknown.

Many teachers have recently been having their classes write poems. This may begin in committee work or in individual material brought to class. This method involves sharing of ideas. Also it makes writing a pleasant experience and often helps the timid, self-conscious child to forget himself. It helps the child to see the value of his own thoughts and interpretations, too.

¹¹ Holstein, Pauline N., McDaniel School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

"Group-writing goes on only so long before the child wants to express his own thoughts."¹² Thus discussions and group work serve as stimuli for individual writing.

These then are four general trends in creative writing. "There is much confusion and uncertainty in the thinking of teachers both as to the scope of the subject and as to desirable methods of teaching it."¹³ but nearly all teachers agree that they must teach writing in a way that will carry over to actual practice. It is a principle of psychology that a response learned in one situation will tend to operate in other situations if the elements in the second situation are recognized as being identical with those in the first or learned situation. Therefore in order to get pupils to write effectively after they leave the classroom, teachers must seek to make the learning situation as identical in the children's minds as possible with the situations in which they will write outside of class. "Pupils should have back of their classroom writing exactly the same purposes, they should write for exactly the same personally known readers, and they should develop and apply the same types of practical criteria as they would in their normal extra-classroom writing."¹⁴

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¹³ Haskell, Jean, "Improving Written English Through Group Composition," *National Elementary Principal*, (July, 1941), 339.

¹⁴ Traube, M. R., "Before They Write," *English Journal*, (January 1945), 15.

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